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HECB says state needs more college graduates

State board sets public hearings Nov. 10 and 13 on strategic plan for higher education

OLYMPIA— The citizen board that develops Washington's long-term higher education plan is calling for a 20-percent increase by 2010 in the number of students who graduate from college and the consolidation of three state agencies into one strong statewide governing board.

The Higher Education Coordinating Board, whose members represent a cross-section of business executives and public-sector experts, released a draft this week of its 2004 Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education. An interim version of the plan is due to the Legislature and governor by mid-December. The final plan will be published next June following legislative review.

The board has scheduled two public hearings in November to hear public reaction to the plan. The first hearing will take place Monday, Nov. 10, in Spokane, from 7:30 to 10 a.m. in Room 110B of the Health Sciences Building at the Spokane Riverpoint higher education campus. The second hearing will be on Thursday, Nov. 13 in SeaTac, from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. in the Chaps Ballroom of the Radisson Hotel, 17001 Pacific Highway South.

"A business-as-usual approach isn't going to get the job done for Washington college students and the businesses that need to hire them," said Bob Craves, the chair of the HECB who is also one of the founders of the Costco Corp. "Our colleges need to enroll and graduate more students, and to become more responsive to the needs of the economy. At the state level, we need to invest more funding and make sure we get a strong return on the taxpayer's dollar."

By 2010, the draft plan calls for:

-- Increasing by 15,000 the number of students who earn bachelor's, associate's, graduate and job training degrees each year. Washington currently ranks 33rd among all states in the production of bachelor's degrees – below the national average. The proposed increase would bring Washington in line with the national average for bachelor's degree production and maintain the state's current strong ranking (6th nationally) in the production of associate's degrees.

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- Improving the economic responsiveness of Washington's colleges and universities by creating more education and job training opportunities for students in high-demand fields whose graduates meet the needs of Washington businesses and communities;
- Providing increased research funding to help Washington universities contribute to the state's economic development – currently, only four states provide fewer research dollars to their universities than Washington;
- Allowing selected branch campuses and community colleges to evolve into four-year universities if such developments meet local community and business needs; and
- Streamlining state higher education management by consolidating the HECB, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board into a strong statewide governing board with authority over college budgets and policies. The recommendation does not contemplate changing local college boards of regents and trustees.

The draft plan offers several strategies to achieve the goals, including an increase in state-funded enrollments that would create an additional 45,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) slots by 2010. In addition, several strategies would increase efficiency by reducing the need for remedial courses for new high school graduates, reducing the number of students who graduate with excess credits, and increasing the number of students who stay in school from one year to the next. The plan also calls for new state enrollments to be funded at the average rate of comparable colleges and universities in other states.

“This plan is a strong endorsement of flexibility at the local level,” said Gay Selby, HECB vice chair and former superintendent of schools in Kelso. “We’ve talked to people all over the state for more than a year, and we heard them when they said, ‘One size doesn’t fit all.’ The higher education system needs to become more flexible, and provide more opportunity to solve problems at the local and regional level.”

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The plan is available through the HECB web site:

<http://www.hecb.wa.gov/Docs/packets/03October/HECBDraft-10-30-2003.pdf>